

[Keystone Estate]

26042

March 2, 1939.

Rev. [A?]. M. Blackford

Director

"Keystone" Episcopal

School for Orphan

boys,

Atlantic Beach Rd.,

So. Jacksonville,

Florida.

Rose Shepherd, writer.

KEYSTONE ESTATE.

"Keystone" in its decadence still shows signs of its former grandeur, when it was classed as one of the most magnificent estates on the South side of the St. Johns River.

Willed by its former owner, Mrs. Mary [Packard?] Cummings, unconditionally to St. Johns Episcopal Church of Jacksonville, it is used as a home for orphan boys of the parish, presided over by the Rev. and Mrs. A. M. Blackford. It now houses eleven boys who walk

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to the highway each morning to meet the bus which carries them to the South Jacksonville public schools.

The estate is approached by a drive of a quarter of a mile from Atlantic Beach Highway, six miles out from the business section of South Jacksonville.

A circular driveway leads to the front entrance of the residence, in front of which is a well preserved hitching post of bygone days - a three foot negro boy of iron, with freshly painted trousers of blue, the blouse of yellow, and cap of red, with a steel stirrup in his hand, through which the bridle of many a pony has been passed, pending the visit of its young rider.

The White frame residence with its high gabled roof, bespeaking its northern type of architecture, its balconies fringed with "wooden lace" date it back to the late 1870's.

The caretaker's cottage erected in 1889 stands where the old gate made entrance from the road. It is empty now, the windows out, 2 the roof falling in, the long halls which echoed to the laughter of the caretaker's four lively children are lanes of loneliness, with leaves blown in heaps in the corners and long cobwebs hanging from the ceilings.

Back of this building is the laundry, one or two of the rooms still show signs of use.

To the left of the path on the way to the swimming pool is the old cistern with its long brick covered top, cracked and [moss?] covered. Beside it a modern improvement, an up-to-date incinerator for disposal of trash and garbage.

Another long building further on is the old recreation building, a closed-in card-room with the old rickety tables showing their use, and to the rear a long bowling alley. This latter the boys still enjoy, though the roof leaks in places.

A hundred feet further on is the "big tree." While the vicinity of Jacksonville is noted for its large live oaks, this is said to be the "big tree" of this section. The long limbs are in places

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supported by iron posts to hold them up from their own weight, and extend forty feet and more in all directions.

An amusing story is told about a hen belonging to the Cummings, which had stolen its nest away from all prying eyes, until one day Mr. [Cummings?] saw her slyly betake herself to one of the long limbs touching the ground, on which she hopped, and tip-tipped - one foot over the other, until she had reached the crotch of the limb and the body of the tree twelve feet from the ground. Mr. Cummings brought a stepladder from the house, and mounting it was surprised to discover a nestful of eggs, on which the hen was sitting. He secured 3 canvas which he tucked below and around the nest in such a way as to keep the birdies from falling overboard when hatched, and there they remained undisturbed until they were able to walk, when they were lifted down to the ground.

A bronze tablet placed on the tree many years ago by Mrs. Cummings, reads: "This mighty oak by whose immovable stem I stand And seem almost annihilated, Not a prince in all that proud old world beyond the deep E'er were his crown as loftily as he Wears the green[corona?] of leaves With which Thy hand has graced him."

Beyond the tree is the remnant of the old orange grove, with a number of [satsuma?] and pear trees.

A deep [artesian?] well furnishes water for the estate, and the hydrants through this section are frequent, leading from the underground irrigation system, and on being turned on spray the adjoining sections thoroughly.

The path now is flanked by tall [oleanders?] of different colored blooms, some of the bushes being ten and twelve feet tall. To the left are the remains of the former owner's rose beds, with a few straggling bushes. It is said Mrs. Cummings was passionately fond of roses and spent many hours here enjoying rare blooms.

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We [have?] now reached the forested part, with its tall straight pines and magnolias, untrimmed, and hung with moss. The swimming pool, walled with rock, cemented on the sides and bottoms and with slabs of black slate forming the top ledge, now presents itself, and we [observe?] the boys now home from school, are busy with scrapers 4 removing the accumulated mud and debris, preparatory to turning on the water for its first filling this season. The youngsters are stripped to the waist and are evidently enjoying their work, in happy anticipation of a swim afterwards.

The dressing rooms adjoining the swimming pool are covered with the wild yellow jasmine vines, roof high, and now in full bloom.

The path now leads to the right and through the trees we sight the tennis court, and are told that in the old days there was a dance pavilion here also.

We are now on the return trip to the house and pass through the flower gardens, where Rev. Mr. Blackford's love of flowers is manifested in blooming rose-bushes - one a Black Beauty - with sweet peas of variegated colors, calendulas and other spring blossoms.

Under the brow of the hill up from the ravine formed by the overflow from the artesian well is the old bricked in ice-house and potato bin, relics of yesteryears' necessities.

We are now on the crest of the hill, with the majesty of the St. Johns in full view, a sail-rigged lumber ship and a black bowed freighter pass each other almost opposite - the first coming in to the port of Jacksonville, the other bound outward with cargos for Charleston, Baltimore and New York.

The old high pump-house with its [cupola?] for views up and down the river is in a state of decay and unsafe for visitors, while the dock where the Cumming's private yacht was [went?] to land has long since washed into the river.

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Below us, however, is a most pleasing sight. Sand and silt pumped up in the U. S. government's dredging operations to deepen the channel of the St. Johns has accumulated until it has extended the shore line about a hundred feet. This has been bulkheaded, filled it, and fertilized, forming a large [?] garden green now with growing cabbages, carrots, lettuce, and other seasonable vegetables.

At the back, protected by the high bank, are acres of calla plants. Rev. Blackford has a special love for calla lilies, and his development of the culture of these beautiful Easter lilies has brought him both fame and fortune, for they are in great demand.

April 3, 1939.

Keystone Episcopal

Home for Boys

Jacksonville, Florida

(Additional)

Rose Shepherd, writer.

KEYSTONE EPISCOPAL HOME FOR BOYS

(Excerpt from St. Johns, 1934, Centennial booklet).

Mrs. Mary Packer Cummings, daughter of [Asa?] Packer, of Pennsylvania, was a constant friend and benefactor of St. Johns Parish.

She died in October, 1913, and by her will she left to the parish to be used as a church home her estate on the south side of the St. Johns River, consisting of about thirty acres of land, with a splendid residence, outhouses, swimming pool, orange grove and gardens.

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She bequeathed a generous sum of money as an endowment for the home; and in addition to the property and money left to establish and endow the home, a trust fund was established and the income thereof, after the termination of a life estate which still exists, was bequeathed to the parish to be used for either [parochial?] or diocesan purposes.

In 1921 the home was opened under the supervision of the Rev. Ambler M. Blackford, and since that time a wonderful work has been accomplished in caring for and training young boys.